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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the involvement strategies present in the textual conversations of four graduate students enrolled in a fully online graduate course in language education. The students interacted through an asynchronous interactive computer conferencing system that allowed communication from two continents. Two 2-week ongoing discussions were analyzed, including one on historical and theoretical perspectives on language for specific purposes and on technology in the language classroom. The three interpersonal involvement strategies examined in the computer-meditated communications were imagery, repetition, and dialogue. Each incidence in a category was analyzed by function, and its structural and interactive characteristics were measured against one theory. Distribution in the conversations by participant and over time was noted as well. Results indicate that, from the beginning of their online textual interactions, the students used personal involvement strategies develop a social context of rapport and intimacy that facilitated their ability to convey to academic meanings. This suggests that they worked cooperatively to create a learning, supportive community and to facilitate the joint negotiation of academic meaning. (Contains 22 references.) (MSE)

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Interpersonal Involvement Strategies in Online Textual Conversations: A Case Study of a Learning Community

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In this paper, I report on a case study that documents the development of an *online learning community* or a social group that communicate on line through an asynchronous communication system to achieve joint learning tasks (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, Turoff, 1997). This process was substantiated through an analysis of the *involvement strategies* (Tannen, 1994) present in the *textual conversations* of graduate students enrolled in a fully online graduate course that I taught during Spring, 1997 and Fall, 1998.[1] Involvement strategies are described as a psychological "internal state which shows itself in observable linguistic phenomena" (Tannen, (1994, p.12), a concept similar to Tela's (1992) *textual visualizations*, or artistic, emotive and poetic language found to be used in computer-mediated communications (CMC) to convey non-verbal and paralinguistic meanings.

The students in the study reported herewith interacted through an asynchronous interactive communication system, Conferencing on the Web (COW)[2] that allowed them to post textual messages at different times and from three different continents.[3] I argue that the presence of involvement strategies and their distribution in the textual conversations created by the students over the life of the course is evidence of their development as an online learning community. In addition, I suggest that an increase in the use of involvement strategies signals the growing maturity of the learning community over time.

Interpersonal involvement strategies in the form of *imagery, repetition, and dialogue* (Tannen, 1994) were chosen as the analytic framework for the study for two reasons. First, because there is

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substantial evidence from the literary and sociolinguistics literature that imagery, repetition, and dialogue, are present in both verbal and written texts, such as literary texts (Tannen, 1994, Chafe, 1984, 1985; Becker, 1982,1985, 1988; Scollon & Scollon,1982, and Friedrich, 1986, among others) and that familiarity with these strategies creates meaning and rapport among participants facilitating the negotiation of meaning, or the process of conveying meaning and inferring meaning during spoken interaction. Thus,

> [c]ommunication takes place because the dialogue, details, and images conjured by one's person's speech inspire other to create sounds and scenes in their minds. Thus, it is in the individual imagination that meaning is made, and there that it matters. And it is the creation of such shared meaning – communication – that makes a collection of individuals into a community, unites individuals in relationships (Ibid, p.29).

In addition, research in CMC acknowledges that online textual –e.g., electronic -- discourse is "a medium of written discourse with the spontaneity and flexibility of spoken conversation" (Schrum, 1993, p.4). The chosen framework, which is present in both literary and spoken genres is, I believe, appropriate to examine the dual nature of electronic discourse.

Second, as stated earlier, research in CMC suggests that poetic, emotional, and artistic language have been used in non-academic textual messages to illustrate non-verbal and paralinguistic cues (Tella, 1992). Although tentative, these findings suggest that interpersonal involvement strategies are also found in electronic discourse and that their function may be to facilitate the negotiation of meaning between and among virtual conversationalists.

The study is significant for at least two reasons. First, although research in computer-mediated

communication acknowledges the emergence of social communities from groups that come together via distance technology (Collis, 1997; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, Turoff, 1997, among others), it has not studied how community development is represented in electronic discourse, nor has it studied the nature and distribution of meaning markers such as interpersonal involvement strategies (Tannen, 1994) as indicators of community building over time. Second, while there are a growing number of CMC studies regarding the need for students to work and interact around academic tasks, little or no research has been done about how online social communities develop among groups of students collaborating and interacting at a distance through asynchronous interactive systems, and how this growth is manifested in their textual messages.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study is discussed here focusing on two constructs that are key to my research: the social community and interpersonal involvement strategies. The social community has been studied by disciplines such as anthropological linguists, sociolinguists, and sociologists. A *speech community* has been described as a social group that shares a common language code and the rules for its appropriate use (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972). Referring to the work of Wallace (1966) and Sherzer (1974), Gumperz (1983) suggest that a speech community is "a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations" (p.24). Tannen (1994) suggests that shared meanings are what characterizes a group of individuals as a speech community.

Similarly, the CMC literature (Collis, 1997, among others) suggest that learning communities at a distance share the basic cooperative and interactive principles of *speech communities*. Thus, online

social learning communities are said to be groups that come together and interact to achieve joint learning tasks (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff, 1997). Furthermore, the important role of emotion in communication has been documented in CMC. research. In fact, it has been suggested that emotional communication is important to nurture and support online learning communities (Rice & Love, 1987; and Johnson, 1990, quoted in Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff, 1997). In addition, it is said that "computer-mediated communication is capable of supporting socio-emotional communication as well as task-oriented communication " (Ibid, p.32). More evidence on this regard is the finding that members of virtual communities "personalize the medium by sharing information about themselves and focusing on shared interests. . . [and by coming] to know one another as individuals and friends" (Ibid, p.32).

The second important construct of key importance to the study is that of interpersonal involvement strategies. Gumperz (1983) describes conversational involvement as

> "the felicitous result of conversational inference, the ability to infer, globally what the interaction is about and what one's participation in it is expected to be, as well as, locally, what each utterance means (p.10).

Gumperz argues that conversational involvement is at the heart of the negotiation of meaning in face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, he suggests that conversational coherence is fundamental in the attainment of conversational involvement. Finally, the interactive nature of meaning making in face-to-face interaction is highlighted by Gumperz assertion that meaning in conversation is an interactional achievement or "a joint production". (Ibid., p.12).

Chafe 's (1985) work on the similarities and differences of spoken discourse and written texts is also important to the understanding of involvement in communication. Chafe's work led him to

characterize spoken discourse as having characteristics he called fragmentation and involvement, and to describe written texts in the form of academic papers as having characteristics of integration and detachment. Tannen combines Gumperz and Chafe's closely related orientations to define conversational involvement as a psychological, "internal state which shows itself in observable linguistic phenomena" (p. 11) in which the negotiation of meaning is "a joint production". (Ibid., p.12).

Tannen suggests that interpersonal involvement is created "by the simultaneous forces of music --sound and rhythm--on the one hand and meaning through mutual participation in sensemaking, on the other. A major form of mutual participation in sensemaking is creating images: both by the speaker who describes or suggests an image in words, and the hearer or reader who creates an image based on that description or suggestion" (Ibid, p.135). Images then create scenes -- or scripts -- "and scenes spark emotions, making possible both understanding and involvement" (p.135). Examples of involvement strategies that work especially on sound are language patterns that are created by conversationalists use of repetition – or variation and expansion – of phonemes, morphemes, words, groups of words, and by the use of figures of speech (Tannen, 1994). Examples of involvement strategies that work especially on sensemaking are, creating images with details, narratives, the use of indirect speech, ellipsis, tropes, and dialogue (Tannen, 1994).

Computer-Mediated Communication Research

Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore (1991) refer to electronic discourse as a special type of interactive written discourse that occurs in simultaneous computer to computer terminals. They suggest that *real time* virtual discourse, or synchronous online interaction, exhibit several characteristics of

spoken discourse, such as omission of unstressed pronouns, especially subject pronouns; omission of articles, both definite and indefinite; omission of finite forms of the copula, and shortening of words through use of abbreviations and symbols. Characteristics of written texts were also identified, among them, formal expressions, elaborate or expanded structures, such as the use of relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and subordination (Ibid). These findings are confirmed by Tella (1992) who investigated the use of electronic mail in the teaching of English as a foreign language to high school students. Tella found that e-mail messages exhibited oral structural characteristics, such as elliptical language, colloquialisms, casual style, and a focus on cohesion.

The dual nature of electronic discourse (e-disc) "includes a broad range of communicative formats ranging from the more interactive and speechlike to the more compositional and textlike" (Foertsch, 1995, p.302). The former is represented by e-chats, or synchronous interaction "that is akin to having a conversation through a computer" (Ibid, p.302); e-mail, or the fast transmission of messages and documents that can either be copied or attached to someone else's electronic mailboxes; e-bulletin boards, which involve posting messages to a large number of individuals "and having asynchronous groups discussions" (Ibid, p.302). The latter include e-conferencing, which "comprises more formal group discussion where the number of people allowed to respond to a question is limited and the interaction is carefully monitored and refereed (Ibid, PAGE); e-journals, where peer-edited papers are disseminated to a "network of subscribers and allow for more rapid commentary on written works than is the case with traditional journals, and e-archives, where information is stored, searched and accessed electronically (Ibid, p.302). All e-disc types "contain elements of . . . . discourse that . . . do not fall

neatly into any particular category. Moreover, e-dist, is said to hold an intermediate position between production and comprehension, between the asynchronous act of reflective correspondence and the synchronous collaboration of speech. (Hawisher & Moral, 1993, quoted in Foertsch, 1995, p.303).

Methods

The analytic corpus of the study was selected from an extensive database of messages posted in AltaVista, the conferencing system, by students in the on-going discussions. Discussions were closed after a two week period and student participation was a requirement. The first discussion developed under the topic of the historical and theoretical perspectives on language for specific purposes (Topic 1, Module 1, COW archives), and four concurrent conversations were organized by the students under the topic of technology in the language classroom (Topic 4, Module 4, COW archives). Conversations, such as Module 1, were posted at the beginning of the course. Those in Module 4, were posted at the end of the course. Selecting conversations at the beginning and end of the course, will allow me to compare and contrast the nature and distribution of involvement strategies as indicators of a maturing learning community.

Methods and Procedures.

Participants

The participants were Eric, an on-campus student, Marcia, an online student residing in the northern part of the state of Indiana; Shannon, an on-campus student; and Mike, a student residing in Italy. They were chosen from a total of eight students enrolled in the course because they moved along the course requirements simultaneously and thus, participated in the same conversations in the same

period of time. Two of the students were on-campus and two were online, one in Italy and the other one in Fort Wayne, Indiana. All of them were graduate students.

Procedures

Discourse analysis, or the study of language beyond the sentence, is the method used in the study for analyzing the nature and distribution of involvement strategies in the textual conversations of students in the I.630. Although discourse analysis represents the orientations of several disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, it "share[s] assumptions and practices regarding their theories, methods, and data, as well as, perhaps more importantly, disciplinary background and training."(Tannen, p.6).

Tannen's (1994) involvement strategies categories were used to identify and analyze the involvement strategies of repetition, dialogue, and imagery and details, in terms of their function and distribution in the analytic corpus. These strategies were chosen because they are at the heart of the negotiation of meaning in face-to-face conversation, and also, in literary texts (Tannen, 1994, among others). Figure 1 identifies Tannen's (1994) proposed taxonomy of involvement strategies.

The involvement strategies were analyzed by category and function. That is, the social, cultural and personal meanings that they represented were initially identified. Then, justification was made by checking their structural and interactive characteristics against Tannen's description of the nature and function of each involvement strategy. Finally, their distribution in the conversations, by participant and over time, was noted before a full interpretation was advanced.

[place Figure 1 here]

Data Analysis

Conversation 1: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on LSP Conference

1. L630, Module 1, Section 1, Sept 17, 1997

This was the first asynchronous online conversation of L630. It developed around the question: what are the similarities and differences between Language for Specific Purposes(LSP) and Language for General Purposes (LGP)?

Eric was the first student to respond. Except for the involvement strategies described below, his response had the markers of a formal persuasive essay, e.g., he stated the argument and took a position, provided substantiating evidence for his position, and concluded the essay by summarizing the situation. All along, Eric justified his thinking with formal references to the research of others as is customary in formal academic writing. In addition, his textual response was tied together by rhetorical and surface cohesive ties such as the use of linking words , and phrases.[5]

1. Eric:1 (9/17/97, 8:25 pm) Well, I'll go first. Don't be offended if it reads like a freshman
2. essay. And do let me know if I'm way out in left field (my normal position).

Eric's initial statement (1) incorporates at least two types of repetition strategies. First, in (1) he starts his posting with an ironic trope which is used to say the oppositive of what he means (Tannen, 1994). Second, his ironic statement includes the metaphor 'it reads like a freshman essay"and is personalized to suit his intended meaning. Eric closes his introduction by quipping: "And let me know if I'm way out in left field (my normal position)". Again, he uses irony and repetition of a metaphor that originated with baseball and was intended to illustrate situations when a player was 'in the wrong place

of the field at the wrong time". The function of Eric's ironic trope and metaphor appear to be humor and an effort to present himself in a relaxed, informal manner to his virtual peers. Eric continued

3. When I began teaching English to adult speakers of other languages several years ago,
4. my first concern was that these students need to learn English. Just English, not EAP
   [English for Academic Purposes]
5. or ESP [English for Specific Purposes] or whatever. So you can tell that I started
6. out with a pretty big chip on my shoulder with regards to LSP [Languages for Specific
7. Purposes].

In (4) and (5) Eric very effectively uses repetition with variation in the form of syntactic self-repetition –". . . these students need to learn English. Just English, not EAP or ESP or whatever"-- to create coherence and to "send a metamessage of involvement" (Tannen, 1994, p.52). In (6) he uses an idiomatic expression as an involvement strategy ("I started out with a pretty big chip on my shoulder. .).

After Eric, the instructor takes the floor encouraging student participation. She is followed by Marcia, an online student.

8. (9/23/97, 8:03 am) I, too, am impressed with Eric's thorough reply to the LSP/LGP
9. distinction. I agree wholeheartedly that LSP seems to have been the vanguard in learner
10. language classes. The notion of student needs dictating a curriculum does not sound
11. like my first experience teaching EFL 20 years ago. But my first experiences
12. teaching ESP did help me understand that a curriculum can be negotiable. . . .
13. I teach in a workplace setting, with a fairly large Hispanic population. I assumed I
14. would be teaching ESP, i.e. English to assist students in their job responsibilities. But I
15. soon found out that most students wanted English to talk to their children's teachers,
16. to their neighbors, to understand the television news and to write just enough to take
17. care of common everyday tasks. Sounded like LGP to me.

Twice, this student uses imagery and details to images and scenes that help us relate her earlier experiences as an EFL and ESP teacher to her position regarding the issue being discussed here: the differences between ESP and LSP. The first instance occurs in (11) where she provides details about

her experiences as an EFL teacher ("But my first experiences teaching EFL. . .") followed by her experience as an ESP teacher (12). Later on, starting in (13), she describes the context of her workplace at present "I tech in a workplace setting"). These personal stories, although brief, are full of images for Marcia's virtual audience, all of them in the foreign language education profession. These images that according to Tannen (1994) "work through the individual imagination to create involvement" (p.166).

The instructor takes the next turn-at-talk. She closes her posting with "Talk to you all later!" thus, using a metaphor to reaffirm the relaxed textual conversation environment she wanted to create. Following the instructor, one of the guest instructors, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, joins in the discussion to make the point that "LSP is a tool for the learner not an art form" (L630, 1.1-29). Shannon, an on-campus student, follows with a posting.

18. (9/28/97 12:10 am) I think that's true and a good thought, that we get so caught up in
19. discussing the complicated jargon, methods, linguistic breakthroughs and the latest
20. trendy happenings and discoveries in the wide world of academic, we forget that the
21. learner doesn't care about these things. I think we tend to become more teaching
22. oriented than learner-oriented. The learner doesn't care that Skinner provided one
23. linguistic theory, then Chomsky came along and now we're teaching you elements of
24. one/both of them, dear learner, and aren't you thrilled d to have the utmost in
25. educational advances!. . . nope. They just want to go out and use what they've
26. learned that day in the way that they need to use it. And hey, maybe there are those
27. out there who might learn the best studying poetry! So while I agree with Eric,
28. MOST people are going to wonder what is this useless fluff we are learning, where is
29. the professional vocabulary, etc., it would probably be good to keep poetry in mind as
30. a possible tool we might use. For that matter, the readings show numerous examples
31. of exercises, drills, conversation analyses, etc. for the learner to work through as part
32. of an ESP course. Im sure there are learners who would much rather use the
33. structuralist drills than the cognitive methods that H&W seem to tout as being
34. preferable! It's a matter of learner preference; as was earlier stated. So, I guess what

35. I'm trying to say, in my own haphazard way, is that I'm taking Margaret's (I hope it's
36. okay to call you that' I'm not up on my protocol, sorry!) statement as a reminder that
37. versatility is okay, and that as teachers we must use every tool at our disposal to
38. serve the learner in the most effective way we can.

This student displays what Tannen would call a high involvement style (1994) because of the variety and density of the involvement strategies she uses. After agreeing with Margaret's position - "I think that's true and a good thought", Shannon shows her disapproval at what she perceives to be a disparity between research and practice by creating an 'academic scene' with much detail ". . . that we get so caught up in discussion the complicated jargon, methods, linguistic breakthroughs and the wide world of academic" (15-16). This scene creates involvement with her peers: all graduate students and professors that can relate to the controversy about the relationship between research and practice. Shannon could have avoided the details and still gotten her point across, i.e., that theory and research is of extreme importance in the academy and that at times, applications to practice may not reach the learner.

Then, in lines (20) through (22) she abruptly interjects what Tannen (1994) calls *constructed dialogue that fades in and out of the conversation* and addresses the learner: " and now we're teaching you elements of one/both of them, dear learner, and aren't you thrilled to have the utmost of educational advances!". Another instance of constructed dialogue in this excerpt is present in lines (32) and (33). In (32) Shannon refers to Margaret's statement and again, abruptly, she addresses Margaret. This change is signaled by the use of parenthesis that mark the boundaries between them "(I hope it's okay to call you that [Margaret]; I'm not up on my protocol, sorry!)". In addition to

constructed fading in and out dialogue, other signs of conversational involvement are the colloquial interjections used by Shannon, such as 'nope', (22), 'and hey' (23), and 'fluff' (25); several contractions and one instance of what Tannen calls *fragmented syntax* (42) where Shannon capitalizes the word "MOST", for emphasis.

Michael took the floor next (10/15/97, 2:55 am). His posting is an excellent example of the more formal, integrated and detached and integrated writing academic style (Chafe, 1985), as evident in the rhetorical organization of his argument (See Appendix B for full analytic corpus). However, there are examples of his use of metaphoric details that create scenes, and scenes create meaning through involvement. One example of metaphoric detail used by Michael is ". . . and what I also have to keep in mind is that there is not one portal through which all my students must enter.' Here, Michael uses a metaphor to convey the idea that ESP instructors need to individualize on the basis of students' needs. Later on in his posting, Michael creates a *literary genre scene* by stating:'Shakespeare once wrote about the seven stages of man, reminding us that we are all merely players'. The metaphoric detail in Mike's posting creates involvement in an otherwise formal textual posting.

Another prepatterned expression used by Michel was "We all like to talk shop when we go out after work". This highly idiomatic expression assisted him to illustrate the many roles of individuals and how English for Specific Purposes needs to recognize them in order to fulfill its mission. Finally, as with the other participants, Michael uses colloquial interjections, such as contractions.

Eric (10/18/97, 9:17 pm) responds to Michael and agrees with his position.

39. I agree with pretty much everything you had to say (no "but"s coming, promise)

40. and the couple of the examples you've chosen have me thinking.

In (36) and (37) Eric creates an interesting construction in that he joins two unequal clauses with the conjunction 'and', rather than with 'but' because, I suspect, he promised that no 'buts' were coming. He continues by referring to Piaget and reflect about the process of over-generalization in children. He uses rhetorical questions such as "didn't Piaget use the dog example to show how language use is constant reconstruction of understanding for children?" and "how can one over-generalize when they never knew the distinction?, etc. In addition, he uses detail to describe dogs "all four legged furry things". Eric goes on to agree with Michael's position that "there isn't a great structural distinction between EST [English for Science and Technology] greetings and ELP [English for Legal]. . . purposes." Further ahead in his posting, Eric uses *constructed dialogues* (Tannen, 1994) to illustrate how miscommunication can occur because of cultural differences rather than structural ones

41. There are some big cultural differences that cause interference from L1. Japanese
42. business people have a stock introduction which might translate something like
43. this "ALC Education's man, Eric (last name) at your service". . . . If I am an
44. executive I might list my department, "I'm Eric (last name), vice-president of
45. R&ampD." Or if above, Eric uses an *altered idiom* : "no ifs or buts about it' but,
46. I'm an academic researcher, I would probably mention my university or research
47. topic, "I'm Eric (last name), from IU. I've been doing some EPP work."
48. Honestly, even with friends, I find my self name dropping, "This is my
49. girlfriend Kazuko, she's doing cancer research in Tokyo." And when I don't
50. I usually add something, "I'm Eric (last name), I come from Texas." What do
51. you think? Are there formulas in greetings much deeper than the ones that we
52. English teachers have been teaching for years?

Tannen suggests that constructed dialogue can be direct and indirect, with direct quotations being "more vivid, more effective" (p.25) than indirect quotations. Eric's constructed dialogue would

fall under the direct quotation or speech. As "Images create a scene visually-- such as "what did things and people look like?", constructed dialogue -- both direct and indirect --creates scenes auditorially-- "what did people say and what did they sound like?" (Tannen (1994, p. 29)

Michael's response (10/21/97, 2:27 am) to Eric includes the use of idioms and a narrative with an example of indirect speech or reported speech (Tannen, 1994) in an otherwise rather formal textual posting.

53. . . . and I admit that I'm talking a bit off the cuff here . . . As for your
54. second observation, I remember reading a cooking article a few years back
55. where the writer went to Spain to get some recipes. One of the great benefits of
56. going there she said, in addition to the food, was being able to use the subjunctive.
57. She loved all the 'It is possible that. . . ' constructions.

In (53) Michael uses an idiomatic expression "I am talking a bit off the cuff here". In (54) he initiates a narrative (Tannen, 1994) --"I remember reading a cooking article a few years back. . . " – which includes an example of *reported speech* "One of the great benefits of going there, she said". At this point, the instructor posts a message summarizing the discussion and formally closing it.

2. Module 4, Section 4 Conversations (February, March, 1998)

In this module, there were five conversations organized by cooperative student dyads who interacted with each other via COW, the interactive communication system, and via e-mail. In this section, I will analyze excerpts from three representative conversations. These conversations were selected because they were posted late in the semester. I wanted to compare the nature and distribution of the involvement strategies used by students at this late time in the semester with those from Module 1, Section 1, to see whether students who had discussed, collaborated, and even

gossiped together for about eight months (in a special 'virtual room' we called *The L630 Café*) had become a learning community, and whether the change was reflected in their involvement strategy behaviors.

The student dyads followed the same guidelines. First each dyad was to read Furstenburg & Morgenstern's (1992) article. Second, a summary of the article followed by two or three thought-provoking questions were to be posted in COW. Each dyad was responsible for the organization and facilitation of their textual conversation. At the same time, all students were encouraged to visit the different conversations and to participate in the discussions.

Because of space constraints, I will not analyze the whole sequence of textual postings in every one of the conversations in Module 4, Section 4. Rather, with excerpts from the conversations, I will illustrate the similarities and differences in involvement strategy use with those found in Module 1, Section 1.

Conversation 4.

In the following example, Eric responds to Marcia's invitation to join in her dyad's conversation (February 26, 1998, 0:16 a.m.). He is the first conversationalist.

58. (March 2, 1998, 1:50 am). This is Eric. There are some thoughts on that first
59. issue: [quotes Marcia's first question]. I read the article to say that they think that
60. technology is merely a tool. Their point regarding learning is that we are
61. attempting to use the computer tool to match a purpose set out by different
62. settings. We are trying to force the computer to work like a teacher in a classroom
63. (a square peg in a round hole).
64. They would prefer, I believe, that we first examine how the computer works, what
65. it can do, and then determine how best to use those strengths without out
66. pedagogical parameters. How deeply will technology affect us? Technology is

67. our friend – especially appropriate technology.

Two involvement strategies stand out in Eric's textual response. First, his use of a prepatterned language in the form of a metaphor in (67) "a square peg in a round hole". Tannen suggests that prepatterned expressions are prevalent in English conversations "although their form in utterance is often only highly not absolutely fixed" (1994, p. 40). Second, in (70) and (71), Eric uses another metaphor"[t]echnology is our friend".

Shannon takes the floor next (March 3,1998, 9:16 p.m.).

68. How true - technology can be our friend, but I think sometimes it can be a little too
69. obtrusive. I think eventually,we'll be forced into using computer technology in the
70. classroom. For example, I frequently peruse magazines to find articles for one of my
71. learners. Now I hear that magazines are starting to go on the Web, and soon hard
72. copies will be obsolete! I'll have no choice but to turn to the computer. And today in
73. a class we were asked to write a little essay. I sat down with my pencil and the little
74. blue book, and I realized just how long it's been since I've WRITTEN. My hand was
75. sore after two pages of writing! Why? Because everything has to be typed these
76. days. In fact, I think for that reason alone we should be sure to at least incorporate the
77. basics of computer use into the ESP classroom - if they expect to get anywhere in the
78. professional world, they'd better know how to type up an essay! Fact of life anymore.
79. We're heading towards that trend; the Web is cheap, saves trees, and let's face it,
80. addictive. One day we won't even teach 'writing', per se; it'll be 'typing composition'
81. classes before we know it. Goodbye cursive v. manuscript! And I'm not sure I like
82. feel, that books are practically sacred, and the day they cease to crowd my
83. bookshelves because everything I need is in a box, what a dark day that'll be. Still, I
84. guess it has it's advantages, and we pay a price for everything good.

This posting overflows with involvement strategies such as repetition, imagery and details, and personal narratives. The result is a tapestry of meanings that personalize (Chafe, 1985) Shannon's textual response. For example, in addition to colloquial interjections, such as contractions, and writing the word 'written' in capitals to emphasize the fact that hand-writing is getting to be obsolete because

of the computer is taking over its functions, starting in (74) through (80). Shannon uses short personal narratives full with details to make her point about the imminent change from pencil to computer! In addition, in (84) she uses irony and humor when she states "One day we won't even teach 'writing', per se; it'll be 'typing composition' classes before we know it. Goodbye cursive v. manuscript!"

Marcia follows (March 4, 12998, 9:58 p.m.).

85. (March 3, 1998, 9:16 pm). . . Regarding Eric's comments first. I agree with you
86. that F& M are basically saying that technology is a tool, furthermore, a tool we do
87. not yet fully understand. . . . As for technology being our friend . . . true. Friends
88. help out. Offer advice, come up with the "darndest things", just as they frustrate
89. us and are at times not there when we need them. So yes, technology fits that
90. role. But the raceless, odorless, expressionless monitor in front of me still leaves
91. me missing an old fashioned classroom.

Marcia's posting is full of imagery and details, and again, the metaphor of technology as a friend is discussed. From (91) to (93), Marcia describes what friends do: "friends help out, offer advice, come up with the "darndest things", just as they frustrate us and are at times not there when we need them" and creates scenes of real friendship that amazingly enough fit well – I am sure– our experiences with the computer, and technology in general. In addition, she uses imagery and detail to highlight the differences between the computer as the classroom, and the traditional classroom.

Next, Michael joins in.

92. (March 7, 1998, 5:53) . . . Once upon a time I was a financial consultant, and one of
93. my standard speeches at seminars was that money is a tool. Then I would point out
94. that it is possible to put a nail in the wall using a shoe, and at times, if we don't have a
95. hammer, hey, we use the shoe. But if we have a nail we want to put in the wall, it
96. makes little sense to go out and buy a shoe when we can buy a hammer just as easily..

What is interesting about the above posting is Mike's use of a classical introductory marker in

legends and folktales (96) "Once upon a time..." to initiate a personal narrative This marker has strong connections to scenes from childhood and as such, it creates rich imagery and as such it creates meaning (Tannen, 1994).

Conversation 5.

The following are examples of growing rapport and intimacy between and among the students.

97. (Eric, March 2, 1998, 2:03 a.m.) Hey Mike, it's Eric, let me hit on one of your questions.

This introduction to Eric's posting is followed by Mike's response.

98. (Mike, March 2, 1998, 4:08, a.m.) Hiya Eric -

After Mike concludes his response, Shannon joins in (March 3, 1998, 8:39 p.m.),

99. Nnm- that was a kitten saying hi, by the way :)

These address forms indicate rapport and intimacy between friends. In addition, Shannon's attempts to bring her cat into the virtual room creates a very powerful scene of intimacy.

Conversation 8.

Here is an example of efforts made by students to encourage participation in their conversations and of the degree of imagery and detail present in them. This is an excerpt from one of Eric's postings, where he introduces the topic of his dyad's conversation to his peers.

100. (March 2, 1998, 1:31 a.m.) Welcome to my tiny space for thought. This is Eric and I am
101. focusing on Furstenberg and Morgenstern's article, but I want you to bring whatever
102. expertise you have to this room. Here are the questions that this article churned
103. up in my head.

In (58) it appears that Eric uses a figure of speech to make concrete the abstraction of his

virtual 'space'. In (60) again he uses another figure of speech that creates images and promotes joint interpretation of meaning (Tannen, 1994).

Findings

In this section, I will first describe in detail the nature of the interpersonal involvement strategies present in the textual conversations of L630 students. These strategies will be described and classified according to the taxonomy listed in Figure 1 which organizes involvement strategies into two categories: strategies that work primarily on sound, and strategies that work primarily on meaning (Tannen, 1994). Second, I will discuss their distribution in the textual postings of the students, over time.

By far, the involvement strategies used by L630 students are strategies that work primarily on meaning through the *joint effort of participants* rather than strategies that work primarily on sound and rhythm.[6] The strategies that are discussed in this section were present in most of the students' textual conversations, regardless of the student's style of interaction. For example, Shannon, one of the students, would be considered a high involvement writer because of her particular and heavy use of many types of involvement strategies. On the other hand, Mike is an example of the more analytical, formal writer. Yet, these and the other two students – Eric and Marcia – used involvement strategies for conveying their meanings through their textual postings. The biggest difference among them was the intensity of their use of sensemaking involvement strategies as they tried to convey and infer academic meanings.

Examples of sensemaking strategies ordered in terms of the density of their use by the students were tropes, particularly metaphors, and irony. These strategies appeared to add imagery and detail to

students' descriptions, thus creating scenes rich with meanings that were negotiated as students interacted through their textual *visualizations* (Tela, 1992). The use of tropes in conversation and literary texts is pervasive and powerful as an analogical device, both in spoken and literary texts.

Constructed dialogue covered involvement strategies present in the data set, such as what is called *reported speech* and *direct quotation,* and *fading in and out* dialogues. By constructed dialogue is meant "a speaker framing an account of another's words [or framing an account of his own experiences]" (Tannen, 1994, p.110) where "uttering dialogue in conversation is as much a creative act as is the creation of dialogue in fiction and drama." (Ibid, p.101). Moreover, the use of constructed dialogue is an example of the simultaneous operation of sound and sense involvement strategies in interaction (Ibid).

Another set of strategies used by the students fall under the category of imagery and detail. Tannen (1994) suggests that creating images is a joint production between the speaker who creates an image with words -- in the case of our students the image is created through textual postings -- and the hearer who forms visualizes the image and relates it to his or her experience to create scenes or schemas which are at the heart of the communication of meaning. She further suggests that "images . . . are more convincing and more memorable than abstract propositions (p.137). One imagery and detail strategy that is worth mentioning here is that of creating personal stories with details and imagery, including metaphoric details. All students shared personal stories that created powerful images and scenes in the imaginations of the peers. This was evident from the responses to each other and the references they made to this and other details in their postings.

In addition the students used what I call *personalized greetings*, particularly in their textual conversations at the end of the semester to address each other. I found these greetings to be a powerful indicator of the rapport and intimacy that developed over time and I believe that this marker signals the growth of the learning community.

The above involvement strategies were used for various functions. Some of these functions are, to build rapport and intimacy; to help peers to interpret one's meanings; to show emotion; and, for the important function of contributing to the joint production of meaning making between participants and to its situated nature. Regarding the use of strategies that work primarily on sound, only repetition with variation was used by one student (Eric, (4): "my first concern was that these students need to *learn English. Just English. . .* ". Finally, the distribution of involvement strategies over time did not indicate a clear change in terms of their type or the density of their use.

Discussion

Earlier in this paper, I postulated that the presence of interpersonal involvement strategies and their distribution in the textual conversations created by L630 students over the life of the course would provide evidence of their development as an online learning community. In addition, I suggested that an increase in the use of involvement strategies would signal a level of maturity of said learning community.

Findings from an analysis of the data suggest that indeed, from the beginning of their online textual interactions, the students used interpersonal involvement strategies *to develop a social context of rapport and intimacy* that facilitated conveying their virtual academic virtual meanings. If learning communities are groups of individuals that come together and interact to achieve joint learning tasks

(Collis, 1997) then I would suggest that these initial research findings provide evidence that L630 students worked cooperatively to create a learning, supportive community and to facilitate the joint negotiation of academic meaning through the use of involvement strategies (Tannen, 1994). Furthermore, students' efforts to enhance the meaning potential of their textual messages through the use of imagery and details, constructed dialogues and other involvement strategies are evidence of their joint work toward sharing academic meanings (Tannen, 1994). In addition, CMC research suggests that the development of learning communities among online students is very important to them because it appears to decrease the non-completion rate in such courses (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1997) and to increase students' successful completion of online courses. This research may help in developing strategies to facilitate the development of such online social communities.

These findings, although tentative, are important because they allow us to describe in terms of linguistic and interactive the nature of academic language interactions of online students through an asynchronous interactive communication system. Thus, they may have relevance both to the study of academic discourse online, and to research in CMC. However, my thesis that an increase in the use of involvement strategies over time would signal the growing maturity of this learning community is inconclusive. Rather, what the data suggests is that the use of involvement strategies, particularly those that work primarily on the joint negotiation of meaning, did not substantially increase over time. The only difference was that, at the end of the semester, students introduced the use of *personalized greetings* (e.g., Eric (100) "Hey Mike, it's Eric. . . ", and Mike (1010 "Hiya Eric - ") which were not present at the beginning or mid-semester times. Personalized greetings is then an example of

involvement strategies that are not included in those that focused the study, yet, they appear to be an important indicator of the growth and maturity of online learning communities.

Finally, although these findings cannot be generalized to other situations, they provide initial evidence of some of the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic strategies that learners use to make sense of virtual interactive environments and to create communities of learners. Although research in this area is beginning to develop, much more research that builds on findings from case studies such as this one is needed if we are going to learn about how to guide our students to succeed in online interaction, and if we, as instructors, are going to adapt our online courses so that they promote the development of speech communities that are "held together by common norms and aspirations" (Gumperz, 1983).

Figure 1. Interpersonal Involvement Strategies (Adapted from Tannen, 1994)

Strategies that work primarily on sound	I. Rhythm Studies in conversational synchrony document the rhythm and coordination of face-to-face conversation where "movements and utterances are synchronized and carried out on the beat" (p.18). Tannen (1994) suggests that "[f]inding a way into a conversation is like joining a line of dancers" (p.18). Scollon (1982) claims that rhythmic synchrony is at the heart of Gumperz' (1983) notion of contextualization. II. Patterns of repetition and variation 1. phonemes Example: fields ever fresh and groves ever green 2. morphemes Example: " . . . because you're gonna be hungry before we get there" (Tannen, 1994, p.20) 3. Phrases Example: "Well, sir, he went over there a third time. And he didn't come back. And he didn't come back. (Tannen, 1994, p.21) 4. Longer Discourse Sequences Questions are likely to follow questions, such as "Do you carry cigarettes? What brand would you like?" (Tannen, p.21) 5. Style Figures of Speech "Ask not what your country can do for you Ask what you can do for your country (Tannen, p.22)

Figure 1. Involvement Strategies - continued.

Strategies that work primarily on meaning	1. Indirectness/ellipsis "Indirectness contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking" (Ibid, p.23) 3. Examples of tropes metaphors, "speaking of one thing in terms of another" (Tannen, 1994, p.24)) metonymy, "speaking of a thing in terms of something associated with it" (Ibid, p.24) synecdoche, "a part for the whole" (Ibid, p.24)) irony, saying the opposite of what one means (Ibid, p.24) proverbs 4. Constructed dialogue direct quotation, indirect, third-person report (Ibid., 25) 5 Imagery and Detail Comparing spoken and written texts, Chafe (1984) found that spoken texts were characterized by concreteness and imaginability, which are associated with particularity. 6. Narration "Rosen (n.d., 1988, in Tannen, 1994, p.27) suggests that the emotional and meaning-making power in all disciplines derives from personal narrative".

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1. The study reported in this paper is part of an on-going study academic interaction patterns that I am researching.

2. COW is an asynchronous Web-based interactive communication system that is organized under a 'star' structure where the center of the star is the main conference Web site. The second level is the *conference* level where multiple conferences can take place. Each conference is organized into *topics* and topics are organized into *conversations*.

3. A total of 8 graduate students enrolled in L630, Teaching English for Specific Purposes during the Fall,1997 and Spring, 1998 semester. With the exception of one student, Michael, who had taken other fully online courses and was about to complete his masters in foreign language teaching, none of the other students had experience with either online courses or with asynchronous interaction via an interactive communication system, such as COW. Students resided in the United States, Italy, Austria, Korea, and Canada. All were native speakers of English.

5. Because of the focus of the discourse analysis in the study was the nature and distribution of involvement strategies of repetition, imagery and detail, and dialogue, a transcription system has not been used to further describe the textual postings. The postings were copied verbatim and include those punctuation marks and other conventions posted by the students themselves.

6. However, these interactive strategies may be used concurrently with interactive strategies and work primarily on sound and rhythm This is an important theoretical consideration explained by Tannen (1994) as follows. In earlier work, Tannen suggested that strategies of sound and rhythm, and those that work on meaning through the mutual participation of individuals work at two levels. However, influenced by the work of Becker (1988, and earlier work) she now conceptualizes them as intrinsic to "a sense of language working in a variety of ways at once" (p.15).